REINVISIONING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY IN CHERIE PRIEST'S

BONESHAKER: GENDER, ETHNICITY, AND, CLASS

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts in English Education

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ABSTRACT

Cherie Priest's *Boneshaker*, an alternate history novel, examines the cultural and political atmosphere in late nineteenth-century America. It focuses on a group of women marginalized from mainstream society because of their race, culture, or class. The novel's heroine, Briar, a poor working woman, is rejected by society and suffers labor exploitation. In response to her oppressive circumstances, she joins a community of women, and together, they rebel against an oppressive, patriarchal society. My paper explores Priest's adaptation of the social, historical, and cultural background of the nineteenth-century and the treatment of gender, ethnicity, and class through her characters.

Boneshaker examines nineteenth-century standards of motherhood and marriage. I argue that it disrupts the extreme codes that define motherhood and marriage because its women are not defined by their status as wives and Briar creates her own conventions for parenting as a single mother. They are not restricted by conventional, middle class nineteenth-century values regarding marriage and motherhood.

I argue that as an alternate history fiction, *Boneshaker* has the ability to liberate and empower those disenfranchised by race, class, or gender. While Priest succeeds in freeing her female characters from oppressive nineteenth-century gender constraints, she does not respond to anti-Chinese sentiment. *Boneshaker* offers a historically accurate portrayal of Chinese racism in the nineteenth-century, but it refuses to effectively confront it in the same way it does for gender oppression and Native American racism. The women in *Boneshaker* are offered gender liberation, and the Native American woman, while she suffers from racist attitudes, is given the power to defend herself from her attackers. *Boneshaker's* Chinese reflect nineteenth-century depictions that stereotype them as submissive and passive. In *Boneshaker*, they are effectively silenced through language barriers or disability, and are never given the opportunity to respond to racism. They continually suffer abuse at the hands of white male characters, but are never given the opportunity to defend themselves.

I argue that *Boneshaker's* treatment of the Native American princess Angeline is in response to nineteenth-century stereotypes of Native women. Priest refuses to reduce Angeline to stereotypes that liken her to middle class white women. In many nineteenth-century periodicals and literature, Native women were written to appeal to the middle class sensibility of white women readers. To achieve this, the depiction of Native women reflected the white middle class woman in looks and values. The role of the Native woman in popular nineteenth-century fiction was typically reduced to the romantic interest of a white man or she was depicted as the noble savage, willing to deceive her people to save white men. I argue that *Boneshaker's* depiction of Princess Angeline as an independent, rebellious, liberated woman, offers readers a historically accurate portrayal of the Native American woman.

The alternate history novel offers *Boneshaker* the ability to reimagine and reinvision the nineteenth-century; however, it does not always take advantage of its genre possibilities. *Boneshaker* is an example of the limitations and advantages of the genre in its inability to significantly respond to Chinese racism while also demonstrating class and gender liberation. *Boneshaker* offers women an alternate space in which they are given autonomy and act as active agents in the construction of history.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to give special thanks to the following:

Dr. Rizzo for supporting my topic and giving me the support and attention beyond what I expected in a director. For being not only a superb adviser, but a compassionate listener and a caring human being.

My committee:

Thanks to Dr. Roger Ladd for guiding me through this process and for his insightful suggestions. I would also like to think him for supporting me through all of my years at UNCP and encouraging me to attend graduate school.

Thank you to Dr. Youngsuk Chae for guiding me, offering suggestions, and supporting my writing.

I would also like to acknowledge fellow students Barry McDougald and Laura Chavis for supporting me and being my companions along the way.

A special thanks to Martha Gibson. Without her guidance and encouragement, this thesis would not have been possible.

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Cherie Priest's *Boneshaker,* a neo-nineteenth century science fiction tale, challenges traditional nineteenth-century roles for women while reinvisioning the treatment of ethnicity in late century America. Even though Priest's Seattle is described as "no place for a woman" (Priest 85), it acts as a safe space, or an alternate setting, where the objectification and oppression of women is countered through female community. The women in Priest's novel experience similar struggles through motherhood, economic hardships, and survival in a male-dominated society, although Priest fails to liberate the novel's Chinese male laborers from oppressive circumstances and racist attitudes. The female community supersedes ethnic and racial divisions as Priest resists diminishing minority characters, such as Native American Princess Angeline, into stereotypes.

Boneshaker's female protagonist, Briar, is clearly the novel's focus as she creates a new kind of nineteenth-century femininity as someone who lives a bleak working class lifestyle as a single mother. Briar struggles to survive as a single parent and working woman, thus she avoids traditional roles dictated by late century patriarchal standards. By comparing Briar to nineteenth-century heroines and popular culture definitions of acceptable femininity, I will suggest that Priest defines a new space for our recreated notions of womanhood. Briar is self-sufficient, performs typically male-oriented work, and lacks interest in beauty, religion, or being overtly maternal. In terms of nineteenth-century standards of marriage and motherhood, Briar is a failed woman, yet she achieves gender equality in a non-traditional community of women.

Boneshaker's female community is made up of women very similar to Briar in their resistance to gender oppression. They are all self-sufficient and combat patriarchal oppression through their non-traditional clothing, etiquette, habits and dominant attitudes and postures. They use cross-dressing in an effort to make tasks less restricting, but also as a way to achieve gender liberation. Briar dresses in her grandfather's clothes because they demand respect from others, but cross-dressing also acts as a way to deflect sexual objectification. The women's way of dress is often a deterrent to physical violence as they are afforded the same respect as a male character; however, when men physically challenge women, they use equal force. As men in the novel accept these women's modified dress and habits, the women become physical and social equals.

Priest's female community maintains less restrictive roles for women through its redefinition of their roles, but it also encourages ethnic equality among the community. In her depiction of Angeline, Priest resists the cultural exotization of the Native American princess. Instead of using stereotypes frequently designated for Native Americans in late century America, Princess Angeline is "alternately motherly and general-like" (Priest 214) with "cavernous wrinkles" and a "leather face" (Priest 214). She does not exist to represent racial unity, Native American goodwill toward whites, or the benefits of Native American assimilation into white culture. Princess Angeline is not a subversive figure acting as a part of the landscape; she is an active figure in shaping the landscape.

Even though Priest succeeds in challenging women's gender roles and ethnic stereotypes, she portrays, with minimal interrogation of, oppression and labor exploitation of the Chinese in nineteenth-century America. Through her characters, Priest gives a historically accurate treatment of the Chinese in which they are physically and

socially isolated and silenced. They are often unable to communicate because of physical disabilities or language barriers; they live in separate quarters, and other characters often use them solely for labor. Their service in the walled city is essential to the economic survival of Seattle and its capacity to operate, but their contributions fail to justify their right to equality among its other inhabitants.

Priest fails to challenge the social and ethnic inequalities her Chinese characters suffer in late century America, but she establishes rejection of its gender roles and attitudes toward ethnic identity in creating her female characters. *Boneshaker's* female characters' social and class status might seem to disenfranchise them, but it empowers them in their exemption from the Cult of Domesticity[1]. Briar, who was once a middle-class homemaker, self-exiles in the walled city, where she liberates herself from a society dependent on her labor, adherence to gender roles constructed through patriarchal values, and the demands of being a good mother and home maker.

I. *Boneshaker* Summary

Set in Washington State in the 1880's, *Boneshaker* is an alternate history tale whose heroine Briar Wilkes, searches for her son in the ruined city of Seattle. In the 1860's, Briar's husband, the inventor Dr. Leviticus Blue, builds the boneshaker, a drill engine used for mining gold in Alaska. Dr. Blue uses the boneshaker to tunnel through Seattle releasing a blight gas from underground. The poison "blight gas" transforms Seattle's residents into flesh eating zombies termed rotters. As a result, a wall is built to

[1] In Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," The Cult of Domesticity or the Cult of True Womanhood is defined by four attributes: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (152). Welter writes, "It was a fearful obligation, a solemn responsibility, which the nineteenth-century American woman had-to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand" (152). Because Briar rejects the Cult of Domesticity she avoids living a life limited by patriarchal standards.

contain the rotters and the poison gas while the residents of Seattle are forced to relocate to the outskirts of the city.

When the novel begins, Briar is living an impoverished life in her childhood home while raising her son and working long hours in a factory. Her son Zeke, sheltered from his father's true nature, decides to travel into the walled city to locate evidence in order to redeem his father's reputation. When Briar decides to make her way into the city to retrieve Zeke, she learns that because of the production of lemon sap, a drug created out of blight gas, people are actually living in the walled city despite its hostile environment.

Upon the release of the blight gas on Seattle, Briar's father, Maynard Wilkes, freed a group of inmates from the city's jail, resulting in his own death, but also making him a local hero. Using Maynard's sheriff uniform, Briar relies on his reputation to maneuver through the city to find her son. Along the way, she enlists the help of Indian princess Angeline and one-armed barkeep, Lucy O'Gunning, to locate Zeke. While in the center of the city, the women discover that a mad scientist named Minnericht is holding Zeke hostage. Minnericht has assumed the identity of Briar's husband, Levi Blue, but Briar claims he is a fraud. Minnericht is actually the ex-husband of Princess Angeline's daughter Sarah, whom he drove to suicide. When Briar denies Minnericht's identity, she distracts him, allowing Princess Angeline to kill him. Briar reunites with Zeke and they travel to the house she and Dr. Blue shared when they were married. There, she reveals that she killed Levi so he could not escape with the boneshaker. As the novel ends, it is implied that Zeke and Briar decide to remain in Seattle.

II. Neo-Nineteenth Century Fiction: Limitations and Advantages

The alternate history novel seeks to change an historical event, exclude the event from history, or alter the time frame or features of the historical event. In *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism*, Gavriel Rosenfeld writes that alternate history "transcends traditional cultural categories being simultaneously a sub-field of history" and "a sub-genre of science fiction" (4). Rosenfeld suggests that "[a]t the most basic level, however, tales of alternate history…investigate the possible consequences of 'what if' questions within a historical context" (4). The alternate history novel is typically inspired by a '"point of divergence,"' or an historical event (Rosenfeld 4). Alternate history fiction is popular because of considerable cultural, political, and scientific movements that act as points of divergence in our reconstructions of history. In "Why Do We Ask 'What If?' Reflections on the Function of Alternate History," Rosenfeld asserts that these points of divergence rose after the 1960's as the result of postmodernism, the information revolution, scientific trends, and "the gradual discrediting of political ideologies in the postwar world" which "has eroded the power of deterministic worldviews" advancing the principle "that everything could have been different" (92). Using the Civil War and the cultural landscape of nineteenth- century America as its points of divergence, *Boneshaker* reinvisions American history.

As a nineteenth century alternate history novel, *Boneshaker* has the ability to examine the nineteenth-century through a twenty-first century lens. While genre allows *Boneshaker* to give a contemporary critique of the nineteenth-century, it is problematic in its approach to cultural and social concerns like race, class, and family. In Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall's "Intro: Industrial Evolution," they praise the anachronistic

qualities of neo-nineteenth century fiction, but they also question its objectives. One of the goals of neo-Victorian fiction is to "understand more contemporary anxieties," (Bowser & Croxall 2) by exploring the past, but Bowser and Croxall question whether it "merely repeats the past and its problems" (Bowser & Croxall 30) or "subverts the past in a useful and legible manner" (Bowser & Croxall 30). While *Boneshaker* challenges oppressive gender and race relations in nineteenth-century America, it does not alter the history of American racist sentiment against Chinese, even though the genre could allow that kind of revision. For example, while *Boneshaker's* women undermine patriarchal gender standards, the novel simultaneously portrays the disenfranchisement of its Chinese characters.

This disenfranchisement is not uncommon, it would seem; in "Steam Wars," Mike Perschon examines the depiction of Asian characters in neo-nineteenth century literature. He argues that steampunk encourages the rejection of Orientalism, but rarely practices it. He asserts that steampunk chooses to avoid Asian characters, depicts them as evil, or reduces them to the hero's sidekick (152). Perschon's assessment of Asian characters in neo-nineteenth century fiction mirrors *Boneshaker's* characterization of the Chinese. While Priest does not reimagine an alternate history for its Chinese characters, it does succeed in its subversion of intolerant social and cultural values towards women in the nineteenth century.

Boneshaker's alternate setting makes its progressive depiction of gender and its connection to race and ethnicity possible. In "Alternate History: The Case of Nava Semel's *IsraIsland* and Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union,"* Adam Rovner argues that the purpose of alternate history fiction is a search for alternate values.

These alternate values often challenge social issues like gender, racism, and poverty, which is why alternate history fiction is often used as a platform for social reform. *Boneshaker* exploits these alternate values to demystify late century patriarchal ideals while reinvisioning femininity, gender, and ethnicity. As alternate history fiction, *Boneshaker* intends to "rewrite history" (Priest 38) by shuffling "things around until they mean something better" (Priest 38). By placing women in the realm of the nineteenth-century while granting them twenty-first-century values and possibilities, *Boneshaker* is a fantasy revision of what may have been possible considering gender and race relations in late century America.

To achieve gender equality, *Boneshaker* equalizes hardships between its male and female characters. The environment in *Boneshaker* is equally harmful to all the characters, creating a space that is not partial to men. Because the alternate historical novel asks the question "what if," *Boneshaker* similarly asks what if women were allowed to adapt without male control. Thus, the women in Boneshaker are empowered to make decisions without being restricted by a husband or a male-dominated society; they rely on gender specific abilities and their own life experiences to make decisions. The women in *Boneshaker* are aware of the specific challenges found in this altered version of Seattle and place importance on relationships and community, thereby making it easier for them to adapt to life in the walled city. Priest alters the domestic gendered spaces women were expected to occupy in nineteenth- century America by eliminating the institution of marriage, forming a female support community, and allowing women to perform masculinity, while, at times, maintaining a historically accurate late century

American culture. In order to create this alternate historical space, *Boneshaker* reconstructs nineteenth-century popular culture and literature.

III. Adapting the Nineteenth-Century Woman

In *Boneshaker*, Priest reexamines the cultural and social environment of the nineteenth-century in America, in an effort to disrupt the extreme and limiting codes of conduct placed on women. The role of the woman as mother, wife, homemaker, and, in Briar's case, worker is established only to be challenged. According to late century cultural and societal norms, the mother is responsible for the physical, educational, and religious needs of her children. Women's periodicals in the nineteenth century often reified the belief that the role of the mother was divine, and, a woman failing to live up to this expectation was an unforgivable offense. As a single, working mother, Briar struggles with the demands of nineteenth-century standards of motherhood. "The Mother," an 1860 piece from *Godey's Lady's Book*, gives an example of how nineteenth-century periodicals contributed to the way motherhood was regarded. "The Mother" describes the expectations and roles of the mother, and argues that out of the many roles of women, the duty of a woman as a mother is the most important. The author writes that if the husband dies, the mother must be a father and mother to the child (par. 1). The mother is responsible for "the early training of the young," (par. 1) "to see to her house and tend her children," (par. 1) and the "education of the young" (par 1). In "Not All a Waif," W.S. Gaffney writes that "*woman*, no matter where her lot be cast, or whatever her condition in life, if she be a mother, has an important duty to perform independent of all other considerations" (par. 1). Briar is clearly excluded from the middle-class values concerning motherhood because she is now a member of the working class. However, her

middle-class background influences her feelings about motherhood. Briar is unable to achieve the level of motherhood expected of middle-class women because of her long working hours and the legacy of shame left by her dead husband's actions. As evidenced in her behavior and feelings about motherhood, Briar confronts conflicting social class expectations. In this creation of an alternate mother role, *Boneshaker* challenges the idealistic notions of motherhood in its realistic depiction of Briar as a working mother.

Often working 14 hour days, Briar is unable to find the time to take interest in her son's life and is often absent as a mother, and, as a result, she is plagued by guilt:

> [t]he boy's [Zeke's] room she avoided for no real reason. If anyone ever asked (and of course, no one ever *did*) then she might've made an excuse about respecting his privacy; but it was simpler than that and probably worse. She left the room alone because she was purely uncurious about it. Her lack of interest might have been interpreted as a lack of caring, but it was only a side effect of permanent exhaustion. Even knowing this, she felt a pang of guilt and she said out loud, because there was no one to hear her – or agree with her, or argue with her - '"I'm a terrible mother."' (Priest 32)

Unable to nurture her son in the way she would like, Briar suffers feelings of crippling guilt. These parental expectations, and the guilt associated with it, pervade *Boneshaker,* so much so that the theme of overcoming societal expectations becomes part of Briar's characterization.

According to late century cultural norms, Briar cannot overcome the challenges associated with her role as a mother, wife, homemaker, and laborer, which indicates she is a failed woman. By failed woman, I mean to imply a woman who does not uphold or

achieve the stereotypes associated with femininity. In Jean H. Baker's article "Mary Todd Lincoln: Managing Home, Husband, and Children," she writes that "marriage and childbearing was an assignment which, if failed, signaled an incomplete woman" and "mothering became an awful, guilt-raising vocation" (par. 15). Briar lacks the feminine and maternal attributes nineteenth-century women were expected to possess and is destined to be an incomplete woman. However, *Boneshaker* disputes these pre-determined attributes and redeems Briar. In a speech to Minnericht, Zeke releases Briar from her guilt: "I know she's not a perfect mother, but I ain't no perfect kid either, and we've done all right by each other so far" (Priest 332). The younger generation of men depicted in the novel, through the promise of its alternate world, liberate Briar, rather than holding her to impractical standards. Zeke was born into working-class conditions, thus, his expectations of Briar as a mother are based on the circumstances in which he was born.

In *Boneshaker*, Priest confronts and replaces the conventional standards expected of women by allowing her female characters to set their own standards of acceptability, while challenging other characters to accept these new women:

> [r]eal women often felt they did not live up to the ideal of True Womanhood: some of them blamed themselves, some challenged the standard, some tried to keep the virtues and enlarge the scope of womanhood. Somehow through this mixture of challenge and acceptance, of change and continuity, the True Woman evolved into the New Woman. (Welter 174)

The women in *Boneshaker* refuse to enact society's standards of female behavior, yet are successful in their endeavors. In this way, Priest demands male characters and readers to accept them.

The women in *Boneshaker* set their own standards of femininity through their behavior, language, and attitudes. They forgo the typical restricting clothing women are expected to wear, they use language in an effort to communicate effectively, and they move in ways that promote efficiency rather than grace. Women in *Boneshaker* challenge patriarchal codes of conduct, and this challenge is also a means of survival in a world dominated by men. *Boneshaker* suggests, then, that patriarchal control is not beneficial to women's physical survival in any situation where a woman must depend on male support. In situations where women rely on men for support, like Briar's dependence on Levi, they are vulnerable because they do not have any power over their own lives. Levi chooses to wreak havoc with the boneshaker, and Briar is left to deal with the aftermath. In *Boneshaker*, women are forced to depend on themselves for survival.

IV. Gender Performance

The women in *Boneshaker* embrace several characteristics that aid them in adapting to survival in the walled city. The ability to adapt takes precedence over the codes of conduct that women were expected to live by in the nineteenth-century. This illusion becomes apparent as the women in *Boneshaker* are intelligent, agile, and strong. They speak, dress, and behave in ways that reinforce their lifestyle, rather than ways that make the men around them comfortable.

By behaving and dressing in a more masculine fashion, the women in *Boneshaker* challenge the cultural ideologies that defined respectable womanhood in the nineteenth

century. Popular nineteenth-century periodical literature dedicated itself to promoting propriety in women. Through advice columns and short fiction, these magazines created directives about fashion, marriage, motherhood, and the appropriate use of manners in different social situations. In "Papers for Girls, No. 5 & 150: Manners," the author asserts that "to affect to despise manners is to affect to despise civilization itself" (par. 2). While the knowledge and practice of displaying appropriate behaviors and attitudes was important in late-century American society, the women in *Boneshaker* refuse to adhere to its rules. That the women in *Boneshaker* fail to promote or practice propriety is an obvious rebellion against female codes of conduct found in late century middle class America. Boneshaker's women create a new set of social and cultural codes that support the working-class woman.

The way women choose to dress in *Boneshaker* allows for greater freedom of movement in the rugged landscape of the walled city, but it is also a rebellion against nineteenth-century female dress codes and gender expectations. In *Gender Trouble,* Judith Butler articulates the concept of gender performativity and presentation. Butler argues that because there is no original gender, all gender is imitative, which makes cross dressing possible. As gender is an illusion, it can be "instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies" (174). The women in *Boneshaker* are able to exploit male perspectives about gender through cross dressing. Because gender is an illusion, the men accept the women's masculine authority solely based on the way they are dressed and the way they behave. These women embrace their femininity, in their roles as mother and caretakers, but they also perform masculinity in their roles as workers and leaders. In "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," Judith Halberstam also argues that masculinity is a type of

performative behavior. She argues that masculinity is not limited to the heterosexual white male, as women can perform masculinity which she terms "female masculinity." However, when women perform masculinity it tends to be "linked with aesthetic displeasure" (2651) as evidenced in the description of Princess Angeline as "almost androgynous with age" (Priest 205):

> The color of a good suede tobacco pouch or the hair of a deer. The jacket she wore belonged to a man, once. It was cut to fit someone bigger, and her pants were rolled and cinched to keep them from falling down. Her eyes were a pure dark brown like coffee, and they were framed with graying eyebrows that jutted from her forehead like awnings. Her hands moved like crabs, fast and stronger than they looked. (Priest 205-6)

The description of Princess Angeline is characterized by its masculine quality rather than feminine beauty. She is able to excel in her surroundings because she refuses to live, dress, and behave in a way that supports middle-class ideals regarding femininity. Descriptions of Princess Angeline focus on her agility and strength instead of exoticized stereotypes of the Native American princess.

Briar performs masculinity as an impoverished, single, working mother. At thirty-five years old, she does not "look a minute younger" (Priest 22). Priest writes:

> Without her coat, her [Briar] body had a lean look to it-as if she worked too long, and ate too little or poorly. Her gloves and tall brown boots were caked with the filth of the plant, and she was wearing pants like a man. Her long, dark hair was piled up and back, but two shifts of labor had picked it apart and heavy strands had scattered, escaping the combs she's used to hold it aloft. (22).

Briar practices masculinity because her lifestyle demands it. She wears clothes and does her hair in ways that helps her work effectively and to protect her body. She lacks feminine attributes like youthfulness, grace, and propriety. Briar avoids the pressures of the expectations of white middle-class women because her life is determined by her need to survive. As a working-class woman, Briar is concerned with the basic necessities of life rather than social appropriateness. Because of her lifestyle, Briar is able to sense danger quickly, knows how to use weapons, and places little value on civility, making it easier to survive the difficult situations she encounters within the city. When she enters the walled city, she continues to practice masculinity in order to protect herself from harm, and like the other female characters, Briar develops an attitude that projects confidence and fearlessness. The women are able to talk to, negotiate with, and instill fear in male characters if needed.

In its depiction of the cross-dressing woman, *Boneshaker* adapts characters and popular culture working-class icons from nineteenth-century writing. In Luis A. Iglesias's '"And Yet He May Be Our Man"': The Cross-Dressing Sailor in Cooper's Early Sea Novels," he writes that James Fenimore Cooper's nineteenth-century sea tales blurred gender lines and the ideology of separate spheres through their cross-dressing female characters. As a cross-dresser, Cooper's sailor girl becomes "empowered…ironically, by her marginalized social status" (Iglesias 284). Cooper's cross-dressing sailor girls and the women in *Boneshaker* use clothes to disguise themselves in order to enter male spaces where they skillfully perform male labor and often excel at it. As marginalized women, Briar, Princess Angeline, and Lucy are free to perform masculinity in ways that help them survive the walled city. Like Briar, the '"female sailor bold"' was usually a lower-

class woman who assumed male dress for economic reasons stemming from familial or domestic abandonment" (Iglesias 288). Like the cross-dressing sailor girl, Briar assumes a masculine role in order to survive. Through cross-dressing, Briar is able to create a space in which she can provide for herself and her son without solely depending on men.

When engaging with men in the novel, female characters perform masculinity in an effort to encourage gender equality and to demand respect from the male characters. The way women interact with male characters also ensures their protection from those men. Briar behaves like a "woman who can take care of herself" (Priest 293) and, thus, performs masculine behaviors in order to defend her home, her son, and herself. When Briar encounters the historian Hale Quarter, she greets him with a scowl, displaying the "stiff, defensive right angles" (Priest 21) of her shoulders. When Hale mentions that he came at a time when Briar was not home because "someone told me [Hale] that if I knocked, you'd [Briar] shoot through the peephole" (Priest 23), readers recognize the fear that Briar's reputation instills fear in people who know of her. When Hale enters her home, she displays an uninviting attitude and stereotypical male behaviors like tending to the fire and rolling and smoking a cigarette. Briar rejects the performance of feminine behavior found in nineteenth-century advice literature like "Manner," in which the author describes the way to greet people: "The welcoming smile, the offered chair, the graceful deference and heedful attention yielded to all, are not mere "unconsidered trifles." Their presence may be no great matter; their absence is something not to be forgiven, especially in a woman" (par. 6). In "Engaging Manners," the author writes that the "sweet smile; the quiet, cordial bow; the earnest movement in addressing a friend, or more especially a stranger, who may be recommended to us; the graceful attention which is so captivating

when united with self-possession, these will insure us the good regards of all" (par. 1). Briar refuses to greet and entertain Hale like a woman is expected to do, which demonstrates her rejection of acceptable femininity. Instead of projecting passive or apprehensive behaviors expected of late-century women in the presence of males, Briar, who has mastered the use of rough, terse, unadorned language and attitudes, places herself as Hale's equal.

Princess Angeline similarly utilizes masculine attitudes and behaviors to deflect male authority and dominance over women. When Princess Angeline arranges for Zeke to fly out with Captain Brink and his men, Brink says to Zeke: "Princess paid your way, and we won't do wrong by her. She's an old lady, for sure, but I wouldn't double-cross her. I like my insides right where they are, thank you very much" (Priest 218). Princess Angeline has mastered the performance of masculine behaviors and attitudes, but she has also gained a reputation for having equal physical strength to men because of her fearlessness in fighting them. Zeke describes her as having "arms stronger than just about any man" (Priest 207) even though she is "a smallish woman with skinny limbs and long gray hair" (Priest 366). Throughout *Boneshaker*, Princess Angeline challenges the way women in late-century America are expected to behave in her rejection of any obvious feminine traits, and, in doing so, she rejects male control over her body and the choices she makes.

Lucy, a "large big-boned, moon-faced woman with fluffy, graying curls" (Priest 188), also rejects expected feminine behavior in her quest to survive in a society dominated by male characters. During an attack by rotters, the bar patrons rely on Lucy's leadership skills to plan their next move. When Swakhammer states that it is her call to make the

first move, Lucy replies: "it's *always* my goddamned call" (Priest 197). As danger presents itself, Lucy proves to be the leader of her group of patrons. Even though she is physically disabled, Princess Angeline claims that "one arm or many, she'll [Lucy] break down doors or men or rotters. She's a tough old bird" (211). Like the other female characters, Lucy dresses like a man and knows how to communicate effectively with male characters, proving that she is equal to them. Most of the men in *Boneshaker* recognize and respect the authority of the women in the novel, even though they might not typically do so in other settings. Briar, Princess Angeline, and Lucy eliminate the presence of gendered spaces in the walled city by creating an environment where males and females are equal. Male characters who try to force what they consider appropriate female behaviors onto the women in *Boneshaker* are usually eliminated from the city.

V. Workingwomen and the Environment

In addition to confronting difficult issues regarding the status of women, *Boneshaker* addresses the working and living conditions that shape women who reject middle-class values**.** Because Briar is a working mother, she is unable, or unwilling, to achieve the standards set for ideal nineteenth-century women. By focusing on the character of Briar, Priest foregrounds the class of women in the nineteenth-century who struggle to work and raise children alone. Not only does *Boneshaker* recognize working women, it praises them. Even though Briar faces bleak working and living conditions, rather than a life of luxury or intrigue, she is the novel's heroine. Briar, who was once rich, loses everything, but in losing all of her wealth, she is made stronger.

The working and living conditions the women in *Boneshaker* suffer is reminiscent of the poor working and living conditions of women working in factories all over the

United States in the nineteenth-century. The environment in *Boneshaker* is similar to those found in short stories like Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills." Both stories are set in industrial wastelands filled with suffocating images of smoke, stench, and decay. Davis's narrator can "scarcely see through the rain" (Davis 39) and smoke "rolls sullenly in slow folds from the great chimneys of the iron-foundries, and settles down in black, slimy pools on the muddy streets. Smoke on the wharves, smoke on the dingy boats, on the yellow river" (Davis 39). Similar to Davis's iron mill town, the waterworks in *Boneshaker*:

> Hunkered loudly at the edge of the Puget Sound. Twenty-four hours of every day it cranked and pumped, sucking rainwater and groundwater into the plant and stripping it, processing it, and cleaning it, until it was pure enough to drink and bathe in. It was a slow and laborious procedure, one that was labor intensive but not all together illogical. The Blight gas had poisoned the natural systems until the creeks and streams flowed almost yellow with contagion. Even the near-constant patter of rain could not be trusted. The clouds that dropped it may have gusted past the walled-up city and absorbed enough toxins to wash skin raw and bleach paint. (Priest 43)

Though the environments threaten to suffocate the characters in both stories, the characters in *Boneshaker* defeat the lived environment by adapting to it. Rather than succumbing to their environment, they overcome it. Despite its wasteland appearance and horrible living and working conditions in the walled city, much of which is overwhelming to the senses and a danger to the body, it provides a meaningful space for gender equality:

> If she [Briar] hadn't known better, she might've guessed that it had hosted a war in some other time; she might have assumed that some terrible scourge or blast had destroyed the whole landscape. Where there had once been stately structures that held money and the bustle of patrons, now there was only a long, open wound. The wound had gone rough around its massive edges, and it was beginning to fill with rubble. (Priest 290)

While Seattle may look and feel like a doomed city, Briar and the other characters in the novel defend it from those who threaten it, allowing them to create a space that provides shelter for their values and way of life. This space, which itself seems a wasteland, rejects late century patriarchal values and aims to eliminate ethnic and racial barriers for the women in the novel. As the city appears to be open wound, so too does gender inequality plague the women who must navigate cultural expectations.

Because Briar is not consumed by achieving maternal or domestic perfection influenced by patriarchal codes of conduct, she leads a life that makes it easier for her to adapt to the harsh environment in the walled city in Seattle. Like the nineteenth-century working woman, Briar rejects middle-class standards of womanhood, ensuring the survival of herself and her son. The harsh working conditions Briar endures and the social environment in the factory physically and mentally prepares her for life in the walled city. In a passage describing Briar's daily two hour walk to work, *Boneshaker* reveals that Briar already struggles against a harsh physical environment:

> The sun was rising slowly and taking on the milky gray daytime hue that it would never shake…rain spit sideways, cast sharply by the wind until it worked its way under Briar's wide-brimmed leather hat, up her sleeve cuffs, and down through

> her boots until her feet were frozen and her hands felt like raw chicken skin. By the time she reached the 'works, her face was numb from the cold but a tiny bit burned from the foul-smelling water. (Priest 43)

Accustomed to a life of poverty and hard work, Briar is physically and mentally prepared for the hostile environment of Seattle. Ironically, the safer parts of Seattle leave Briar's body battered and unprotected because she must contend with social expectations that mark her as unsuitable to live and work in traditional male roles. The altered and alternate landscape, then, allows Briar to become accustomed to the elements, aware of the dangers, and adaptable to the problems it presents to her body.

VI. Marriage and Expectations

While *Boneshaker* examines the negative effects of work and the environment on the women in the novel, it also addresses the oppressive nature of marriage for women. Briar's marriage to Dr. Blue, which she describes as the kind of choice that "will cripple you for life" (Priest 47), places her in danger because of his actions. Even though Briar emphasizes that Dr. Blue never told her anything about his work, she is still blamed for his actions. When Zeke asks Briar about proof that the Russians asked Dr. Blue to run a test of the Boneshaker engine, he is astonished at Briar's lack of knowledge about her husband's work:

> "But there was never any proof. And if there *was* proof, you [Zeke] couldn't prove it by me [Briar] – because he never showed it to anyone."
>
> "Not even you?"

> "*Especially* not me," she said. "He never told me a thing about what he was doing in that laboratory, with those machines. He sure as hell never shared any of the money details."
>
> "But you were his wife!"
>
> "That doesn't mean anything." (Priest 55)

This exchange demonstrates the way wives knew little about their husband's lives because it was commonplace to exclude the wife from personal or business matters. It also reveals Zeke's limited knowledge of marriage as a child raised by a single mother. Briar relates to Zeke that if she went down to her husband's laboratory, he would "make a big stink about it, how I shouldn't go there without his permission" (Priest 405). In nineteenth-century America, marriage laws ensured economic dependence on the husband by reinforcing the woman's role as domestic worker, but wives rarely had any input regarding economic issues in the home. In "Wifely Duties: Marriage, Labor, and the Common Law in Nineteenth-Century America" Sara Zeigler writes that the wife was "obliged to take care of them home, provide him [the husband] with exclusive access to her body, bear and rear the children, and generally serve as his '"helpmeet"'(65). However, wives were often not the husband's helper in terms of economic or business matters even though if affected the family unit.

When Briar tells Zeke that being Dr. Blue's wife did not mean anything, she communicates the helplessness and oppression women felt as wives in the nineteenth century. Briar's conversations with Minnericht reiterate the oppressive nature of being a wife. While pretending to be Briar's deceased husband, Minnericht scolds Briar for her improper behavior: "You're no one to speak of improper behavior, woman. You left,

when you ought to have stayed with your family; you fled when your duty was to linger" (Priest 320). As a wife, Briar is expected to remain with her husband even after he ruins the city. When Minnericht discusses Briar with Zeke, he displays the misogynist, possessive behavior men target at women: "'I told you, [Zeke] I have men looking for her. This is my city!"' he added with a jolt of fervor. '"it's mine, and if she's inside it"'- Zeke cut him off. '"Then she's yours too?"' Somewhat to his surprise, Minnericht didn't contradict him. Instead he said coolly, '"Yes. Just like you"' (Priest 334). Minnericht, in his attempt to impose patriarchal authority, believes he owns Briar, Zeke, and the walled city. However, the women in the novel defend themselves and the city, taking it back from Minnericht. The walled city offers its women freedom from the oppressive nature of nineteenth-century marriage by giving them their independence.

Briar's experience reveals how men expected a set performance during marriage from women and pressured women for that performance:

> It hadn't all been fear and strangeness, had it? She'd [Briar] honestly loved her husband once, and there were reasons for it. Some of them must have sprung from girlish stupidity, and it wasn't all about the money. (Oh she'd known he was rich – and maybe, in some small respect, the money had made it easier to be stupid. But it never was all about the money.) She could tell Zeke stories of flowers sent in secret…There were charming gadgets and seductive toys…there had been good times too, and that there were good reasons at the time – why she'd run away from home and her strict, distant father and married the scientist when she was hardly older than her son was now. (Priest 46-7)

Even though Briar chose to marry Dr. Blue, her youth, inexperience, and desire to escape her father's home gave Dr. Blue an advantage he chose to exploit. When Briar describes her marriage, she continually questions the reasons she married the doctor. She wants to believe it was not all "fear and strangeness," (Priest 46) but the more she describes it, the more the reader is able to see how Dr. Blue abused Briar's inexperience. Briar wants her marriage to be based on more than a dependence on money and the security it brings her.

Briar's marriage to Dr. Blue is also unusual because of his profession. As the wife of a

scientist, Briar suffers other forms of exclusion as part of the family unit. In Deborah Lindsay's "Intimate Inmates: Wives, Households, and Science in Nineteenth-Century America," she writes about nineteenth-century women who married into the science community and how it shaped their environment: "Wives of scientists were officially excluded from the scientific community, but on many levels - economic, social, intellectual, and domestic - their husbands' memberships in this community controlled their lives" (632). She argues that scientific marriages were often based on socioeconomic status and materialism, rather than love. When Briar describes her courtship with Dr. Blue, she focuses on money and the gifts he gives her, rather than attributes that a woman might look for in a future husband. It is obvious to readers that Dr. Blue, being an older, wealthy, established man, is not looking for a partner to share his life with, but a young, beautiful wife to accentuate his lifestyle. Inside the walled city, the female community Briar becomes a part of understands her innocence of Dr. Blue's actions because they understand that as a wife, Briar would not be privy to her husband's work.

VII. Importance of Female Community

There is no evidence that Briar has any relationships in the workplace or in her community, so she depends only on herself, but later in the walled city, she recognizes the value of relationships with other women. In the nineteenth-century, female friendships were an important part of daily life. Because of the practice of separate spheres, females relied on each other for support in the absence of men. In "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes that "the female friendship of the nineteenth century, the long-lived, intimate, loving friendship between two women…is one aspect of the female experience which consciously or unconsciously we have chosen to ignore. Yet an abundance of manuscript evidence suggests that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women routinely formed emotional ties with other women" (1). In *Boneshaker*, Priest recognizes the importance of female friendships in her depiction of female work and interaction.

Smith-Rosenberg writes that the life experiences of women bound them to each other. She argues that the biological realities of womanhood such as pregnancy, childbirth, and raising children "bound women together in physical and emotional intimacy" (9). In "'Let Us Be Sisters Forever"': The Sororal Model of Nineteenth-Century Female Friendship," Carol Lasser writes that "traditions of solidarity based on common events in the female life cycle and similar task assignments on farms and in households underlay a profound sense of connections among women" (160). *Boneshaker's* women react to each other positively because they share feelings and experiences that are similar, because they are unique to women. Alone in the outskirts of

the city, Briar quickly joins forces with women in the more hostile walled city. Briar is a mother looking for her lost son; therefore, the women within the city do not hesitate to help her.

Upon first meeting, Lucy immediately consoles Briar, and offers her a drink, and clean filters for her gas mask. Priest writes, "this was more friendly contact than she'd [Briar] had in years, and the pleasantness of it smoothed the keen, guilty edge of her sorrow" (Priest 190). When Briar reveals the guilt she feels about being unaware of Zeke's whereabouts, Lucy replies, "You're being awfully hard on yourself. Boys disobey their parents with such great regularity that it's barely worth a comment; and if yours is talented enough to rebel in such grand fashion, then you ought to consider it a point of pride that he's so sharp" (Priest 189-90). The way Lucy treats Briar is indicative of the maternal struggles that women share and the way women help resolve those struggles with each other. The women are connected by gender specific experiences that promote relationships in which they depend on each other for support.

The female bonds in *Boneshaker* are constructed as instinctive. The women easily share their personal heartaches with each other because there is an inherent bond based on the shared female experience of gender discrimination. The discrimination women suffer not only binds them together, but also encourages them to collectively reject gender prejudice. In "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West" Elizabeth Jameson writes that "despite a patriarchal family system, and despite the fact that men got more public recognition than women for their work, women created a supportive female community and helped to shape communities and politics in the West" (6). Because Briar, Lucy, and Princess Angeline support each other, they are

able to control and contribute to their community and act as leaders. They reject gender oppression in their refusal to allow the men in the walled city to control the environment.

In their support of Briar, women in *Boneshaker* challenge gender discrimination because they reject the view of Briar as a failed woman. While Briar feels guilt and shame at Zeke's running away from her, the women in the novel do not make judgments about Briar or try to exploit her situation. Lucy tells her that even if she gave Zeke all the right answers, he would still oppose Briar (Priest 189). Priest writes that the "barwoman sighed in sympathy and said, "'And there you go, don't you? One day, he'd have gotten a bee in his bonnet about the old homestead, and he'd have come poking about regardless. Boys are boys, they are. They're useless and ornery as can be, and when they grow up they're even worse"' (Priest 190). Instead of chastising Briar for Zeke's behavior, Lucy shows Briar sympathy. Lasser argues that women "turned to each other in times of distress as well as success, looking for solace as well as celebration" (165). Briar looks to Lucy in her time of need and Lucy offers her help and advice and together they succeed in rescuing Zeke.

Similarly, Princess Angeline is able to share personal setbacks with the women without fear of judgment:

> "A long time ago, he [Minnericht] was married to my [Angeline's] daughter Sarah. He drove her mad, and he killed her." She didn't swallow, and her eyes weren't warming with tears. This was something she'd known and held against her chest for years, and merely saying it didn't make the truth of it any worse. So she continued. "My girl hung herself in the kitchen, from the ceiling beam. So

> maybe he didn't shoot her, or cut her wrists, or feed her poison… but he killed her as sure as if he *had*." (Priest 373)

Princess Angeline's revelation cements her place within *Boneshaker's* female community because it shows that, like Lucy and Briar, she is driven by overwhelming circumstances that often occur within the scope of the female experience. Princes Angeline's story emphasizes the strength of the maternal bond, but it also indicates the dangerous position of women in marriages. Princess Angeline's story solidifies the idea that females share many of the same hardships in their roles as mothers and wives and that these experiences bond women to each other.

When Lucy reveals her story, it provides her a place within *Boneshaker's* female community because she shares the same feelings of guilt and hardship that the other women suffer. When the blight was released, Lucy reveals that she lost her husband:

> We'd been married ten years, and I didn't want to leave him, but the officers made me. They picked me up and threw me out of town like I was a drunk taking up space on the sidewalk…I came inside…and there he was, all bit up and covered with blood. Most of the blood wasn't his. He'd shot three of the rotters who'd tried to bring him down—you know how they do, like wolves on a deer—and he was alone with their bodies, but he was so bit up…his head was nodding all loose-like, and his eyes were drying up, going that yellow-gray color. (Priest 259-60)

The women's sharing of their personal struggles is a kind of initiation into the group. It is not spoken, but it is understood that these maternal and marital struggles bind the women together. The women's binds are emotional, but they also protect each other from

physical harm. When the women are attacked by rotters, Briar and Lucy intimately share physical space with each other in order to survive the attack:

> Briar didn't feel like she had the maneuvering room to obey, but she heard the warning hum from the enormous gun. As the sound bomb fired, she released Lucy's ties and grabbed her own head with one arm and Lucy's with the other, since Lucy couldn't cover both ears at once. Then Briar buried her uncovered ear against Lucy's breast. The women imploded together, dropping to the ground and huddling while the wave shook the world around them. (Priest 334-5)

The way Briar and Lucy join together to protect themselves against the rotters demonstrates the connection the women share with each other. Even though they are not familiar with each other in terms of the length of their relationships, their struggles as women create a familiarity between them. Because there is safety in numbers, the female community helps the women physically protect each other, but it also offers them space in which they offer each other the emotional support they need and desire.

VIII. Adapting to Life in the Walled City

The lack of male control in the lives of *Boneshaker's* women aids them not only in adapting to their environment, but excelling in it. The level playing field between men and women helps *Boneshaker* achieve gender equality, but it also helps it allows for some ethnic equality, lacking in late century America. The women in *Boneshaker* are not bound by patriarchal ideals of white womanhood as dictated by the Cult of Domesticity, and this freedom allows them to form relationships with the Native American princess Angeline and the Chinese laborers within the city. When Lucy needs her mechanical arm fixed, she tells her companions that she will ask Huojin, a Chinese laborer, because he is

a ‘“smart fellow”’ (Priest 265). Her companion Swakhammer replies that if Lucy keeps making friends with the Chinese immigrants ‘“tongues will wag”’ (Priest 265). Lucy rejects Swakhammer’s patriarchal ideals about acceptable female behavior, and as a result, she has friendships with the Chinese laborers and creates her own assumptions about them. When Swakhammer tries to assert his belief of Chinese stereotypes, Lucy defends the Chinese laborers and makes persuasive arguments in their favor. Lucy’s acceptance of the Chinese in *Boneshaker* is the result of her ability to easily adapt to an environment which calls for race and gender equality.

Conversely, the male characters in *Boneshaker* have difficulty adapting to the presence of ethnic characters which demonstrates a larger inability to adapt in comparison to the women in the novel. When Swakhammer speaks against the Chinese laborers, Lucy replies: ‘“we can’t keep half this equipment running without them and that’s a fact”’ (Priest 263). Swakhammer’s inability to recognize the importance of Chinese labor within the walled city echoes anti-Chinese sentiment popular in nineteenth-century America. In Rosanne Currarino’s ‘“Meat vs. Rice’: The Idea of Manly Labor and Anti-Chinese Hysteria in Nineteenth-century America,” she writes that through the use of American media and popular culture outlets, the Chinese were depicted as unclean and immoral, but also extremely hardworking and, thus, depicted as a threat to the economy. Lucy is able to recognize the value of Chinese labor, while Swakhammer’s discriminatory attitudes about the Chinese reflect popular nineteenth-century stereotypes about Chinese laborers. Atwell Whitney’s 1878 novel, *Almond-eyed: The Great Agitator: A Story of the Day,* reflects the way Swakhammer feels about the Chinese. In the novel, the character Job warns another character about the Chinese economic threat:

> "That's all very well to call them scavengers of work; but the crows steal our corn, and so these fellows will gradually steal our work and do it for a quarter of what we can…[t]hey do their best work as well and cheaper than others, and who's to hinder us from employing them? What are the poor fellows to do whose places these foreigners take?" (20)

Like Job, Swakhammer, is threatened by Chinese labor, and projects his fears through racism: "fact or no, they worry me. They're just like those goddamned crows who hang out at the roofs - you can't understand them, they talk amongst themselves, and they might be for or against you, but you'd never know it until it's too late" (Priest 265). Swakhammer implies that the Chinese language, unintelligible to him, is akin to the sound of crows squawking. Because he is unable to understand it, he claims that it is a coded language the Chinese use to alert each other to danger and make plans to act on it. In a popular late-century Chinese trickster story, the narrator, a character Swakhammer echoes, remarks: '"the Chinese themselves possessed some means of secretly and quickly communicating with one another"' (qtd. in Takaki 108). In *Strangers from a Different Shore*, Ronald Takaki writes that the Chinese in the nineteenth century were often depicted as subversive, clannish, barbaric, and clandestine. While Swakhammer's racism against the Chinese reflect nineteenth-century attitudes about Chinese language and culture found in popular media, Lucy argues that, '"Just 'cause you don't understand them don't mean they're out to get you"' (Priest 265). Lucy is capable of living in and understanding an ethnically diverse environment demonstrating her ability to adjust and adapt to her surroundings and her ability to see people as important because of their contributions to society.

Lucy and the other female characters reject male dominance over their values and opinions regarding ethnicity in favor of tolerance. Unlike most of the men in the novel, female characters recognize the importance of Chinese labor in the city. When an armed Briar enters the city walls for the first time, she encounters several unarmed Chinese men, but she chooses not to attack them, even though she is frightened for her life. When Rudy encounters a Chinese laborer, he kills him immediately, even though the Chinese man poses no threat to Rudy. Minnericht uses Chinese laborers as test subjects for lemon sap; killing many of them, while the "rest of them turned on him" (Priest 267). Unlike the female characters, the male characters do not seem to realize the shortsightedness of making enemies of the Chinese in the city. When Lucy injures her arm and Swakhammer is injured in a rotter attack, Lucy, who speaks Chinese, seeks out the Chinese for help. The women in the novel are aware of the benefits of friendship with the Chinese community and use it their advantage.

Female characters appreciate the value of male and female support, but many male characters often fail to include women in their alliances, thereby lessening their chances of survival. Women in the novel easily recognize the value of Princess Angeline's support and her importance as an ally, but several male characters disregard the princess's experience and longevity in the walled city. When readers are introduced to the princess for the first time, she is characterized by the deserter Rudy as "old as the hills, mean as a badger, and ugly as homemade sin" (Priest 124). Rudy is unable to admit that despite Princess Angeline's gender and age, she is a worthy adversary. Instead of directing attention to her ability or inability as a fighter, Rudy takes issue with attributes that typically concern gender, focusing on her looks, age, and sexuality. When Briar's

son Zeke, whom Rudy is pretending to take care of, asks about Princess Angeline, Rudy replies that she is a "lying whore and a killer too" (Priest 125). When Zeke asks about Princess Angeline's claim to royalty, Rudy replies that "she's no lady; she's a woman. And I guess she's a princess, if you think the natives have any claim to royalty." (Priest 124). Rudy gives no specific reasons for disliking the princess; instead, he applies insults aimed at women to her character. Even though there is no evidence to suggest that Angeline is a whore, Rudy, in his adherence to patriarchal rules governing womanhood, decides her behavior warrants the insult.

A loose woman, according to late-century values, is "in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order" (Welter 154). However, Rudy calls Angeline a whore and argues against her claim to royalty, but he greets her by the term princess even though he dismissed her title earlier. Rudy takes issue with Princess Angeline because he works for the princess's enemy, but Rudy seems to focus on Princess Angeline's gender rather than her opposition to his boss. Instead of avoiding fighting with Angeline or recognizing her ability and teaming up with her, Rudy chooses to fight her and she injures him.

The women in the novel ally with each other enabling them to destroy Minnericht, the man who "likes to hurt women" (Priest 379), by taking advantage of his emotional weaknesses. Minnericht, pretending to be Briar's husband Dr. Blue, realizes that he is not as powerful as he appears to his followers and Briar is able to manipulate his shortcomings in order for Angeline to kill him. Minnericht continually tells Briar that he "made this place what it is today," (Priest 379) but Briar, aware of his real identity, is able to expose Minnericht:

> If you were half the man you pretend to be, you wouldn't need me to prop up your story-and you wouldn't need me to bring in the boys, like you do. Levi was crazy and he was bad, but he was too smart for you to just pick up his toys and run with them. You need Huey because he's smart; and you tried to talk my own boy into staying by telling him a pack of lies. But if you really made this place what it is, you wouldn't *need* to. (Priest 379-80)

Briar exploits Minnericht's need to feel powerful and autonomous by downplaying his sense of masculinity and emphasizing his need for assistance in managing the walled city. While Briar focuses Minnericht's attention on her, Angeline is able to sneak in and kill him: "Before Briar could blink, the old woman [Angeline] was on him, wrapped around him as tight as a vise, as mean as a mountain cat, and much, much more deadly. One of her knives was in her hand, and then it was under Minnericht's chin, in that narrow seam where his skin met his mask" (Priest 380). The way females support each other in *Boneshaker* increase their chances of survival, because they value each other's contributions.

Upon finding Princess Angeline and Briar together, Lucy says, "We don't have too many women down here inside the walls, but I sure wouldn't mess with the ones we've got" (Priest 382). The women, aware of their small population within the city, know that fighting among each other will lead to their downfall. The women also know they have to stick together to survive. Priest writes, "We girls [Lucy and Briar] need to stick together, don't we? She [Briar] understood a little too well why a woman might not want a man to be her extra hands, even if those men were the well-meaning sort with only the best intentions" (Priest 241). The women in *Boneshaker* reject patriarchal codes of

conduct, the practice of ethnic exclusion, and gender discrimination, thus, they adapt more easily than male characters and are able to come together to support each other in the pursuit of common goals.

IX. Freedom in the Walled City

The walled city is often described as "no place for a woman" (Priest 85), but it becomes the best place for the women in *Boneshaker* to thrive. While living in the Outskirts, Briar is excluded from society and rejected among her fellow workers because of her marriage to Dr. Blue. At work she is constantly reminded of her exclusion:

> Over in the far corner, where workers kept company-assigned belongings in cubby-holes, she reached for her gloves…On the palm, down the fingers, and across the back knuckles someone had brushed bright streaks of blue. The right glove had been similarly vandalized. Briar was alone in the workers' area. She was early, and the paint was dry. The prank had been pulled last night, after she'd left for the evening. There was no one present to accuse… "It never gets old, does it?" she said to herself. "Sixteen goddamn years and you'd think, someday, the joke might get old." (Priest 44)

While the walled city might not be a hospitable environment for a woman, working and living in the Outskirts prove to be just as dangerous to Briar, because of people's dislike for her. Inside of the walled city, Briar immediately creates friendships with women similar to her, and before she even arrives, she has achieved a level of respect because of her status as a hero's daughter: "She'd spent twenty years trying to prove she wasn't a thing like her father, and now she had his reputation to thank for her own safety in a very strange place" (Priest 288). In the Outskirts, people around Briar focus on her as the

widow of Dr. Blue, but in the walled city, she is recognized as the daughter of Maynard. On the outside, Briar asserts that even if she tried to explain her marriage to Dr. Blue no one would listen (Priest 41). She adds that people "avoid me and ignore me…I could be forgiven for my father's sins. But I did choose *your* [Zeke's] father, and for *that*, they will never let me rest" (Priest 41). The way Briar is treated at work and her public isolation are as menacing as the danger of living in the walled city.

As a Native American woman, Princess Angeline is also able to thrive inside of the walled city as opposed to outside if it. Inside the city, Princess Angeline escapes the stereotypical depictions and expectations of Native American women. In "'Nature Was Her Lady's Book"': Ladies' Magazines, American Indians, and Gender, 1820—1859," Linda M. Clemmons writes about the depiction of Native American women in popular nineteenth-century women's magazines. In these periodicals, Native American women desired white men, assimilation in white culture, and white ideals of beauty. She writes that "women's magazines of the antebellum period often described Native-American women as beautiful, pious, and thrifty, as well as diligent housekeepers devoted to their families" (40). By living in the walled city, Princess Angeline avoids the racist and stereotypical ideals of Native American womanhood depicted in this category of late century periodical literature. Even though the Native American women shown in Clemmons's article are idealized versions of Native American women, there is a level of expectation aimed at Native American women to behave like middle-class white women in late-century America. In nineteenth-century American literature and history, Native American women became sentimentalized, romanticized, whitened version of themselves. They were expected to perform Indianness by wearing tribal garb and acting

as a noble savage or civilized Indian. *Boneshaker*, in its resistance to stereotypical notions of Native women, realistically depicts the princess as evidenced in actual historical accounts of the real Princess Angeline in Rose Simmons's "Old Angeline, The Princess of Seattle." Simmons writes that efforts were made to civilize the real Princess Angeline but she refused. Like the Princess in *Boneshaker*, Princess Angeline chose "unmolested freedom" (Simmons 506). Rather than succumbing to outside pressures and expectations, Princess Angeline thrives in the walled city along with the other female characters.

As a disabled woman, Lucy would encounter limited acceptance outside of the walled city. On the outside she would be considered a burden on family and society, with limited or nonexistent possibilities in terms of marriage, work, or child bearing. However, inside the walled city, Lucy is a respected entrepreneur, leader, and friend, even though being disabled is imagined by Briar to be a "hideously vulnerable feeling" (Priest 296). Even with only the use of one arm, Lucy is described as tough and is often relied upon to help other characters out of bad situations. The women thrive inside the city because it is completely opposite the outside, where, as women, they would be powerless. Inside the walls, they hold equal power among men.

The women are not the only ones who find freedom in confinement, as the Chinese laborers in *Boneshaker* find the walled city offers them an opportunity to be free of outside pressures and social exclusion. However, unlike the women, the Chinese do not thrive in the walled city, because they battle racism, but they do manage to make a niche for themselves. Racism against Chinese laborers was rampant in nineteenth-century America, making it difficult, and dangerous, for the Chinese to live and work. For

example, Currarino writes that while working-class men were sometimes depicted as living depraved lifestyles, the Chinese were considered to lead the most immoral lives of all working-class men. When white laborers were unable to find work, they blamed the Chinese, which resulted in an anti-Chinese hysteria. The anger whites felt about the Chinese taking their jobs and the perceived threat of their immoral living is evidenced in Rudy's descriptions of them:

> It don't make a lick of sense to me why they just don't go home to their women and children. I can't figure out why they've stuck around as long as they have…I hear they've got a boy or two inside now, and maybe a couple of old women who wash clothes and cook. How that happened, I couldn't tell you – 'cause they sure ain't supposed to be here. There was a law years ago. It kept them from bringing their families here from China. Those folks breed like rabbits…and they're taking over the west. So the government figured it'd be an easy way to keep them from getting settled. We don't mind having them here to work, but we don't want to keep them. (Priest 128)

The anger Rudy feels at the presence of the Chinese laborers is representative of many American citizens' fears of the time. Much like the novels' female characters, the Chinese laborers have no place politically, socially, or economically outside of the walled city. For example, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 made it illegal for Chinese to enter the United States for ten years, and denied citizenship to those already in America. It became permanent in 1902 (Takaki 111). These laws made it impossible for the Chinese to start families or become full members of society.

Inside the walled city, the Chinese avoid the exploitation of Chinese labor and the exclusionary laws put in place to limit Chinese citizenship, immigration, and the freedom to work. However, the Chinese laborers are often the target of violence. Though no one is completely safe within the walls, anti-Chinese sentiment makes it more difficult for the Chinese laborers to survive. Though the Chinese laborers avoid outside labor exploitation, there is evidence that they may experience it inside the walls as well:

> Those are the furnace rooms and the bellows. The Chinamen work them; they're the ones who keep the air down here good and clean, as far as it ever gets good and clean. They pump it down here from up top, by these big ol' tubes they made. It's loud, hot and dirty, but they keep it up anyway, Christ knows why. (Priest 128)

Even though the walled city is dependent on Chinese labor, it does make the Chinese a part of the community which they would not experience on the outside. The Chinese are the only laborers who are able to keep the underground air clean, so there is no competition from other men that might otherwise end in labor regulations against the Chinese. The Chinese may perform a difficult job inside the walled city, but they are free from government presence, large scale racism, and the pressure to assimilate. They may encounter blatant racism and attacks by some of the characters, but other characters work with them and welcome them in the community.

X. The Chinese Question

While the Chinese enjoy some freedom in the walled city, they continue to suffer from racism. As Mike Perschon argues in "Steam Wars," steampunk fiction rarely rejects Orientalist stereotypes, and *Boneshaker* is no exception. While *Boneshaker* offers its

female characters independence and freedom from a male dominated society, it does not reimagine a prejudice-free society for its Chinese characters. As alternate historical fiction, *Boneshaker* is able to look critically at the treatment of Asians in nineteenth-century America, but does not respond to it beyond a realistic depiction of that racism. As *Boneshaker* depicts the historical oppression of the Chinese, it reflects late century Chinese stereotypes. It also employs twentieth-century stereotypes such as the model minority, which credits Asian American success to their perceived hard-working, submissive, and adaptive qualities. While these qualities might seem to form a positive stereotype, it portrays Asian Americans as weak and passive and, of course, any stereotype is unacceptable because of the way in which an entire group is over-generalized. As the model minority stereotype suggests, the Chinese characters in *Boneshaker* act as passive agents in their society.

At the first mention of the Chinese, they are depicted as a threat to other characters. In nineteenth-century popular culture and political ideology, "portrayals of Chinese as heathens, crafty, and dishonest 'marginal members of the human race"' (Lee 145) alienated the Chinese. Lee adds: "At first seen as exotic curiosities from a distant land, Chinese immigrants came to be viewed as threats" (Lee 145). In *Boneshaker*, the Chinese are depicted as racially and culturally inferior and are threatening because of underlying hostile characteristics, which they are falsely accused of concealing. When describing the dangers of the walled city, a pilot tells Briar: "There's a madman named Minnericht who runs part of the city, and big quarters of Chinese folks who might or might not be friendly to a strange white woman" (Priest 89). In this passage, Briar is described by her race and sex, suggesting that both those are at risk in the presence of the Chinese characters.

Boneshaker neglects to challenge stereotypical depictions in its treatment of Chinese characters. The first Chinese character Briar comes in contact with, Fang, is not only constructed through stereotypes, he is likened to an animal and presented as a crouching, sneaky, otherworldly figure. The narrator notes that he is a stereotypically "small man about the same size as Briar, and slender without looking fragile or weak. His black hair was so dark it shone blue, shaved back away from his forehead and drawn into a ponytail that sat high on the top of his skull" (Priest 99). His size, especially in comparison to a woman, codes him as non-masculine, while his hair creates a foreign oddity. When Briar tries to read the Otherness of his body, she learns that even his ally believes he is "just about the quietest son of a bitch I ever met" (Priest 99). Even though Fang is unable to speak, Cly emphasizes his quietness because he is not taking about sound. He suggests that there is a sense of sneakiness and subversion about Fang. The description of Fang continues to focus on his inability to communicate:

> "Does he…' she began, and then feared it might be rude. She asked the man in the loose-fitting pants and the mandarin jacket, "Do you speak English?"
>
> The captain answered for him. "He doesn't speak anything. Someone cut out his tongue, but I don't know who or why. He understands plenty, though. English, Chinese, Portuguese. God knows what else." (Priest 99).

In this exchange between Briar and Cly, Fang is culturally and physically silenced; he is unable to speak because his tongue has been removed, and, even though Fang is linguistically superior, he is unable to express himself through language. In the September 1870 issue of *Overland Monthly,* F. Bret Harte wrote the poem "Plain Language from Truthful James" or the "Heathen Chinee" which became "one of the most

popular poems ever published" (Scharnhorst 377). In it, Harte describes a card game between Truthful James and Ah Sin, a Chinaman who James discovers is cheating. Harte's Poem is indicative of the anti-Chinese propaganda found in nineteenth-century magazines and newspapers. Fang's understanding of the English language and American culture, yet inability to use or emulate it, liken him to the early century "heathen chinee" stereotype Takaki describes in *Strangers from a Different Shore*: Fang is "dark," "impish," and "subversive to white racial purity" (Takaki 107).

With his native Chinese garb, hairstyle and language, Fang represents the fear of the unassimilable Chinese. For example, while Fang has a common Chinese surname, *Boneshaker* chooses to exoticize it. When Cly reiterates that Fang is "good people" (Priest 100) despite his Otherness, Briar asks, "then why is he called Fang" (Priest 100). Cly replies: "As far as I know, that's his name. This old woman in Chinatown, down in California—she told me it means honest and upright, and it doesn't have anything to do with snakes. I'm forced to take her word for it" (Priest 100). Even though Fang is valuable to Cly's crew and is a "good person," Cly still seems to be unsure about Fang's character going to great lengths to reassure Briar that he is harmless. Several times when Fang reappears in the text, he frightens Briar even though there is no indication that she should fear him: "Fang manifested in the cabin with the same scary silence as before. This time Briar knew not to gasp, and the mute Chinese man did not give her any further scrutiny" (Priest 102). Like Ah Sin in Harte's "Heathen Chinee," Fang is characterized as secretive and strange. Fang's character is also stereotypical, because he fits into the hero's sidekick or loyal ally stereotype often found in steampunk literature.

The "Heathen Chinee" stereotype pervades *Boneshaker* in its depiction of its Chinese characters. In the scene where Briar encounters several Chinese men in the walled city, it is eerily reminiscent of a rape scene:

> All around Briar the voices asked questions in a language she didn't speak, and from every direction hands squeezed at her, touching her arms and back. It felt like a dozen men, but it was only three or four. They were Asian – Chinese, she guessed, since two of the men had partially shaved heads with braids like Fang's. Covered with sweat, wearing long leather aprons that protected their legs and bare chests, the men wore goggles. (Priest 115)

The Chinese men, groping Briar in their strange outfits, is reminiscent of a scene from a horror film. The first Chinese character the reader is introduced to is a silent, creepy figure making Briar's encounter with him frightening. Priest writes the Chinese through an "American Orientalist ideology that homogenized Asia as one indistinguishable entity and positioned and defined the West in diametrically opposite terms" (Lee 145). *Boneshaker* reflects dominant nineteenth-century ideologies that effectively dehumanize the Chinese by making them unrecognizable and indistinguishable from each other. As I stated earlier, the neo-nineteenth century novel has the ability to critique and reinvent the nineteenth-century in a valuable way, but *Boneshaker* chooses not to subvert Chinese stereotypes. While *Boneshaker* does not encourage racism against the Chinese, she fails to respond to it. Her depiction of the fear of the Other is not an endorsement of the behavior, but acts as a reminder of how the Chinese were oppressed through racist political and cultural ideology. In Elaine H. Kim's "Defining Asian American Realities through Literature," she writes that in literature, Asians are represented as "always

unalterably alien - as helpless heathens, comical servants, loyal allies and, only in the case of women, exotic sex objects imbued with an innate understanding of how to please, serve, and titillate" (89). *Boneshaker* portrays her Chinese characters through the dominant nineteenth-century lens, making them alien in language and dress, while also posing the tough, gun toting Briar as the antithesis of the submissive Chinese.

Boneshaker's Chinese characters are wrought with disabilities that silence them. Briar observes that when: "She quickly turned her head to glimpse the source and saw an elderly fellow with long white hair and a beard that came to a scraggly point. A white film covered his eyes. Briar could see, even in the orange-and-black fever of the bellows room, that he was blind" (Priest 116). Like Fang, the old Chinese man is physically disabled. Unlike Lucy, the Chinese have disabilities that hinder them. Lucy's arm does not impede her nor does her disability isolate her from other characters. Their disabilities are representative of the plight of the Chinese in the anti-Chinese environment in late century America. Though the Chinese may not be blind to the societal exploitation of their labor, they are silenced by laws that exclude them from mainstream society.

The Chinese are always described as if they are dangerous, but there is no evidence to prove that they are. When Briar encounters them, they do not harm her, and they are never described as being armed. However, several times throughout the text, characters announce that they are actively trying to avoid running into the Chinese even though they depend on them for labor: "Those are the furnace rooms and the bellows. The Chinamen work them; they're the ones who keep the air down here good and clean…They pump it down here from up top, by those big ol' tubes they made. It's loud, hot, and dirty, but they keep it up anyway, Christ knows why" (Priest 128). Rudy is

aware that the Chinese are an invaluable labor force in the walled city, but he is adamant that they remain separate from the rest of the city's inhabitants. When Zeke asks who would do the work the Chinese perform if the Chinese left, Rudy replies: "Nobody I guess…Or somebody else would. I assume. Minnericht would pay somebody, probably. Hell, I don't know" (Priest 129). Rudy realizes that he depends on the Chinese for their labor, but he is also adamant that they do not belong in the walled city and that they should be avoided even though they pose no threat to him:

> "Keep hushed up now. We're coming up close to Chinatown, and the men here, they don't want anything to do with us. And we don't want anything to do with them. We're going right around the other side of their furnace room. It's loud in there, but those sons of bitches have ears like an eagle has eyes." (Priest 129)

There are several descriptions of the Chinese in *Boneshaker* that compare their language to animal sounds and their senses to those of animals. The comparison to the eagle is a stereotype that implies that the Chinese have otherworldly abilities that make them dangerous or somehow more knowledgeable than everyone else around them. *Boneshaker* creates an environment where the Chinese are up to no good or are plotting and scheming against other characters in the novel. While *Boneshaker* explores the Otherness attributed to the Chinese in late century popular culture and literature, it neglects to liberate the Chinese from oppressive circumstances. Alternate history allows for a reimagining of the nineteenth century, but *Boneshaker* only disrupts stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans and women. Unfortunately, because the Chinese are unable to speak, they are silenced by white characters because they are depicted through white eyes.

XI. Adapting the Native American Woman

While *Boneshaker* neglects to reject Chinese stereotypes, it challenges Native American stereotypes in its depiction of Princess Angeline. In popular nineteenth-century women's magazines, Native American women were stereotyped as having middle-class values and being similar to white women, but Princess Angeline is in contrast to the typical depiction of the Native American woman in the nineteenth-century. She does not resemble a white woman as Briar notes that she "looked native" (Priest 366) and she is not known for her grace, beauty, or agreeableness; instead, she is defined by her agility, fast thinking, and brusqueness. In "Chief Seattle and Angeline," Clarency B. Bagley describes an 1860 interview with Princess Angeline in order to dispel romanticized stories about her life, personality, and service to white settlers prior to an Indian war. Unlike popular stories of the time that exoticize Angeline, Clarency writes that "her disposition was anything but angelic" (272) and describes her as a very hardworking mother and grandmother who suffers economic hardship.

Rather that choosing to depict Princess Angeline as an impassive, youthful beauty, softened by white sentimentality, *Boneshaker* gives a more historically accurate depiction of her. In Bagley's piece about Angeline, he writes, "the romantic stories current about Angeline's valuable services prior to the Indian war, in giving the settlers notice of the approaching attack upon the village by the Indians have no foundation in fact. She did not come over in the night by canoe to bring timely warning" (272). The image of Angeline as a sentimental agent for the white settlers is part of the romanticized folklore surrounding Princess Angeline. In a newspaper article titled "Princess Angeline: She Saved Seattle and now She Appears in Portland," the historical Princess Angeline is

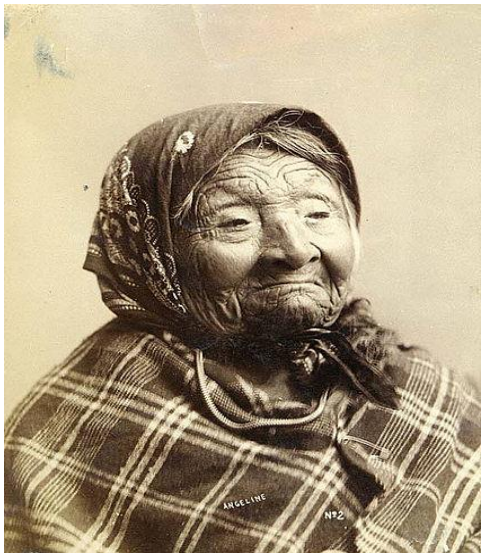

Figure 1. Princess Angeline, ca. 1893

described as an "ugly looking a squaw as you could ever find in any wick-e-up in the Northwest. The ordinary observer who looks at the picture sees nothing but a wrinkled Indian woman. But she has a wonderful history" (10). The article goes on to detail Princess Angeline's achievements as one of the great Native American pioneer woman and hails her as a hero. This article recalls an account of her duping white settlers and saving the Seattle natives from the white "hostiles" (10). She is celebrated as a fighter, rather than recognizing her as a meek Native woman aiding them. Interestingly, in articles like these, there is a fascination with Princess Angeline's appearance. Given the fact that she does not conform to the white woman's image of the Native American woman, news accounts emphasize her appearance. *Boneshaker* describes the way Princess Angeline looks, but her appearance reinforces a matronly quality rather than aesthetic displeasure (see figure 1).

Late century representations of Native American women, most commonly found in dramatic performances of the story of Pocahontas, typically serve as romantic interests for white men or subversive figures working to strengthen relations between the tribe and white men. In *Boneshaker*, Priest reimagines the Native American woman as an individual agent, rather than a part of a tribal unit. She is not restricted by the needs of the tribe, husband, or father, and she is not part of a romantic plot. Princess Angeline is an independent woman who refuses to accept the encroachment of white settlers, and in the

case of *Boneshaker*, Minnericht. Princess Angeline outwits Minnericht and takes his life to avenge her daughter's death and to ensure the safe space she has created in the walled city.

XII. The Working-Class Woman in the Nineteenth-Century

While many popular culture media outlets and late century women's literature focused on middle and upper class women, *Boneshaker,* in its rejection of the Cult of True Womanhood, gives a voice to poor working women. In '"A true woman's courage and hopefulness': Martha W. Tyler's *A Book without a Title: or, Thrilling Events in the Life of Mira Dana* (1855–56)," Judith A. Ranta writes about Tyler's depiction of working-class true womanhood. Ranta writes, "unlike the covert power of domestic heroines…who tearfully prevail by practicing submission, such working-class heroines as Mira Dana manifest independence, toughness, humor, and willingness to openly defy unjust male authorities" (17). Mira Dana is similar to the sailor girl and the working-class heroine in nineteenth-century novels. In the popular dime store novels or the "cheap story," women are typically the heroines. According to Michael Denning's "Cheap Stories: Notes on Popular Fiction and Working-Class Culture in Nineteenth-Century America," between the 1840's and the 1890's, dime store novels were a popular source of reading material for the American working class. He writes that they focused on aspects of working class culture and acted as escapist fantasy for laborers. It was the reading of the "other class, the workers and immigrants" (Denning 7). While *Boneshaker* is intended for all readers, it chooses to glorify the working class. Moreover, in many dime store novels, working class men and women were the heroes and heroines, and many of its readers were young women working at factories across the United States: "The working-

girl novels … made her [the working girl] an active agent in her world, without minimizing the threats and hardships she faced" (Denning, 14). The way Priest constructs *Boneshaker* is very similar to the world dime store novels created.

Boneshaker gives a voice to characters that are typically silenced by middle-class discourse because of their ethnicity, poor economic status, and their inability to fit into a specific gender frame. In many working-girl dime store novels, the heroine is given a new life because of a better money situation or a love interest. While the women in *Boneshaker* are not given a stereotypical happy ending, they are provided a happy ending because they are liberated from male control and a society dependent on their labor by taking control of their environment. Mira Dana, who behaves much like the women in *Boneshaker*, rectifies "injustices perpetrated against women," (18) by taking "justice into her own hands," (18) and exposing bad men. In *Boneshaker*, the women take justice in to their own hands by destroying the men who, in effect, have destroyed the lives of the women in the novel. Refusing to submit to the laws of man, *Boneshaker's* women mete out their own system of punishment against men who try to subjugate them. Princess Angeline kills Minnericht and Briar kills her husband to stop them from destroying the lives of others.

The women in *Boneshaker* live outside the realm of true womanhood requiring them to develop qualities that make it easier for them to survive in the walled city:

> [f]ull realization of true womanhood was not possible for working-class and poor women, who were often required to work outside the home. They were influenced instead by working-class conceptions of womanhood that fostered greater independence, assertiveness, and sensuality. (Ranta 23)

As working-class women, *Boneshaker's* women are forced to have an independent attitude because they realize they must depend on themselves in order to live. When Briar lived as a part of the middle class, she was belittled and controlled by her husband, but as working-class woman, she quickly learns to survive on her own. Like many nineteenth-century working women, the women in *Boneshaker* do not have men to depend on emotionally or financially so they are forced to choose "freedom and assertiveness over submission" (Ranta 26). As working-class women, they know how to handle tough situations and men who threaten them. The submissive woman is absent from *Boneshaker*, because work forces these women to discard propriety in favor of survival.

The typical image of the working class woman in late century popular culture was far different from her reality. In many newspaper articles and popular nineteenth-century literature, working women were characterized as happy wage earners, passing the time working in factories until they found husbands to take care of them. In *Boneshaker* and *A Book without a Title*, working women dispel the romantic image of the single working woman. Briar's work shows the hardships that working women deal with in terms of wage inequality and physical stress on the body. Briar's wages are so low that she can barely afford to feed herself and Zeke:

> She [Briar] was starving, but she was so often hungry that she'd learned to think around it…On top of the shelf of the pantry there was a mixture of dried beans and corn that cooked up into a light stew. Briar pulled it down and wished she had meat to go with it, but she didn't wish very long or hard. She set a pot of water to boil and reached under a towel for a bit of bread that was almost too stale to eat anymore. (Priest 34)

This passage reveals the extremely poor circumstances that Briar and Zeke live in despite her fourteen-hour work days. It is reminiscent of the way the poor working-class characters live in "Life in the Iron-Mills." Davis writes that "their lives were like those of their class: incessant labor, sleeping in kennel-like rooms, eating rank pork and molasses" (42) and "It was the first food that had touched her [Deborah's] lips since morning. There was enough of it, however: there is not always" (43). Deborah and Briar are representative of the realities of working-class life for women, but these realities are often in contrast with the image presented by the media about factory girls in the nineteenth-century. In "Factory Labor and Literary Aesthetics: The 'Lowell Mill Girl,' Popular Fiction, and the Proletarian Grotesque," Lori Merish writes about the cultural representation of antebellum working-class women (1). According to Merish, in popular culture, the nineteenth-century working-class woman was depicted as being chaste, religious, overtly feminine, virtuous, and romantic. The workingwoman was seen as desiring consumerism, sexual relationships, and "the prospect of female economic and social 'ambition'—associated with independent wage earning and the novel pleasures of working-class urban life" (Merish 5). This image is in contrast to the desires and needs of the working class. Briar desires the basic necessities of life as she is described as "skin and bones," (Priest 35) smelling like "industrial lubricant and coal dust" (Priest 34), and suffering from "permanent exhaustion" (Priest 32). As a working-class woman, Briar bears "the signs of poverty, injury, and disease, as well as the marks of labor" (Merish 20). The description of Briar shows the way labor has been inscribed on her body and her home as it is described as a place where she squats.

While the popular media attempted to subvert the truth about the poor working and living conditions of women working in factories, working women also spoke about the realities of factory work. In "The Lowell Offering: Mouthpiece of the Corporations?: Report of Speech by Sarah G. Bagley," the author writes that in response to the Lowell literary magazine, Bagley stated that "it was not the voice of the operatives—it gave a false representation to the truth— it was controlled by the manufacturing interest to give a gloss to their inhumanity, and anything calling in question the factory system, or a vindication of operative's rights, was neglected" (par. 3). Similarly, in *Boneshaker*, Priest challenges the romanticized image of the working-class woman and replaces it with a true representation of the working poor. Bagley noted that "the lengthy work hours deprived them [factory girls] of the most human comfort" (par. 4) and that "many of the operatives were doomed to eternal slavery in consequence of their ignorance" (par. 4). Briar escapes the danger of succumbing to eternal slavery of the 'works, by removing herself from a society that is dependent on the labor of women. The wasteland of the walled city, though dangerous to the body, is less unsettling than the effects of industrial labor on the body outside of the walls.

XIII. Adapting the Wild West

In the walled city, Briar is able to abandon labor-intensive work at the water processing plant, but women seeking out the freedom in the frontier were often subjected to female dependent labor activities. In popular nineteenth-century American Western fiction, the men transform and conquer the land, while the women take care of the home or aid men in their work. Even though the West was often depicted as a kind of utopia that offered to gender liberation, it continued to condone gender and labor oppression and

ethnic exclusion. *Boneshaker*, in its reimagining of the American Western, challenges and manipulates the oppressive, patriarchal social conventions and gender stereotypes found in the genre. In *Boneshaker*, the women traverse and transform the landscape, challenging stereotypes about the West and Western women.

The Western woman in American fiction is restricted to a few stereotypical depictions. In '"A Helpmate for Man Indeed': The Image of the Frontier Woman," Beverley J. Stoeltje identifies the three dominant Western woman stereotypes as the helpmate, the refined lady, and the bad woman. In "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West," Elizabeth Jameson writes that the refined woman, or the civilizer, "behaved," (1) and "was the reluctant pioneer, who, while her man tamed the physical world, gently and passively tamed him and brought civilized culture to the frontier" (1). She is sensitive, emotional, and fragile, but she must learn to adapt to the inhospitable environment of the West or perish. She is:

> [t]he image of woman many settlers brought to the frontier, both male and female. Although some elements of this image proved useful in the new environment, more strength and initiative were required thus those who could not adapt "broke," either physically or emotionally, from the strain. (Stoeltje 31)

Boneshaker rejects the role of woman as civilizer, because its women refuse to act as passive agents in a male dominated society. They are willing to tackle the danger in the walled city if it affects them and they force order in their environment without male support. Because they reject the virtues of True Womanhood – piety, submission, purity, and domesticity – they are already capable of surviving in and dominating the Wild West.

Unlike the civilizer stereotype, the helpmate is a strong-willed, capable, working woman who is successful in adapting to frontier life. She shows:

> strength and initiative exhibited in coping with the hardships and the demands of the life they led…She was able to carry out routine, everyday chores of milking, cooking, sewing, gardening, caring for chickens, childbearing and childrearing, caring for the sick, and generally acting as partner with her husband. Such women were equally adept at handling emergency situations…but the primary defining feature of this group of women was their ability to fulfill their duties which enabled their men to succeed, and to handle crises with competence and without complaint. (Stoeltje 32)

The West seemingly offers women gender liberation and female empowerment; it also exploits female labor. While men are out traversing the landscape, the helpmeet is trapped in the home. The women in Boneshaker share many of the characteristics of the helpmate in their ability to physically and emotionally bear hardships and emergencies. When rotters attack the women in *Boneshaker*, they are quick to defend themselves, while also helping each other. However, what sets apart the women in *Boneshaker* from the helpmeet is the absence of husbands or male counterparts to support. While the labrwomen do support and help each other, and in the case of Briar, take care of family members, they maintain their independence and reject the use of their bodies for the exploitation of labor. For example, Lucy and her husband owned a restaurant together, but it is described as an equal partnership: “Me and my husband Charlie, we kept up a place where people used to come - mostly men. The old wharf rats and fisherman in their oiled coats, the prospectors with their tin pans banging together on their backs…they

came for food" (Priest 258). Lucy is not at home supporting her husband in his work, but is an equal and active participant in their business venture. It is described as an enjoyable experience rather than as a kind of obligatory labor that requires significant patience or submissiveness. In their refusal to act as support systems for men, the women in *Boneshaker* refuse to allow their bodies to become agents of domestic comfort for the men around them. They resist the stereotypical representation of the woman as helpmate to her husband.

The helpmate stereotype is a meek, passive, homemaker, but the bad woman in American Western fiction is typically associated with drinking, gambling, prostitution, and gun fighting. The bad woman was not considered welcome in polite society and was a partner to the stereotypical bad man in Western fiction:

> The bad men also lived outside the margins of society and did not conform to the code of "civilization" or participate in the institutional life of society-thus they were the natural partners of the bad women. Their endeavors did not require that the female partner be a helpmate, and a working partner, but that the female be available for temporary periods of time when the male's activity brought him into her presence. (Stoeltje 40)

The bad woman was portrayed as overtly sexual and her presence satisfied the reader's desire for "passionate, heterosexual relations on the frontier" (Stoeltje 40). To find sexuality on the frontier "one must look beyond institutionalized society to the wilderness, inhabited by animals and bad women" (Stoeltje 40). *Boneshaker* employs the bad woman stereotype in its use of the rough talking, gun slinging, masculine woman, but it resists sexually objectifying her. *Boneshaker's* bad woman is not the cowboy's

sidekick, but her own main character. While she lives on the fringes of society, she refuses to engage in behaviors in which she uses her sexuality for financial gain or to lure men into actions in which she is able to get something she wants. The bad women in *Boneshaker* fit into the bad woman stereotype because they have to be in order to survive the walled city. They resemble many of the depictions of Western women in popular culture in the late century. In an 1860 article titled "Wild Women in the Wild West," the author writes that the Western woman "are strong, healthy, long lived; they don't love to be pale and headachy; they have duties and cares; can eat pork and beans, and go to meetings without gloves; take care of a sick friend, watch through long, weary nights by the pillow of a poor neighbor" (4). The writer adds that he or she can "barely say much of the power which women hold in these distant regions. Her dignity, savoir faire, and independence make her the master of the most puzzling situation" (4). While the women in *Boneshaker* may or may not eat pork and beans, they are an independent group of women who master their environment, while challenging the stereotypical representation of the Western women in popular culture and fiction.

Boneshaker's women are intelligent, head strong, and realistic, which adapts the stereotypical depiction of the Western woman as otherworldly and barbaric. In an 1882 article about Western women, the author exemplifies the savage woman stereotype:

> [t]here is an originality- a raciness- among the women of the West, which is eminently attractive. They touch the confines of civilization and barbarism with such a grace, that the precise petit maitres of the Atlantic are thunderstruck or turned into gaping statues at their fascinating wildness and audacity…A Western belle dashes through the crowd as she would through the river mounted on

> horseback. Nothing impedes her. She makes manners, and controls the rulers of society as she marches through it – throwing dandies aside as a ship does the billows. (par. 1)

The stereotype of the Western woman as barbaric, wild, free, and connected to nature is reminiscent of nineteenth-century Native American stereotypes. Interestingly, Native Americans are typically absent from American Western fiction except in the role of the villain or the youthful, sentimental Indian woman who is sympathetic to whites.

In its depiction of Princess Angeline, *Boneshaker*, places a Native American woman as a main character, and it also frees her character from Native American stereotypes found in late century Westerns. Considered the first American Western dime novel, Anne S. Stephens's *Malaeska, the Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, is a good example of the way Native American women were depicted in nineteenth-century popular fiction. It promotes Native American stereotypes in its storyline and depiction of its Native American female character Malaeska:

> A young Indian girl was sitting on a pile of furs at the opposite extremity. She wore no paint—her cheek was round and smooth, and large gazelle-like eyes gave a soft brilliancy to her countenance, beautiful beyond expression. Her dress was a robe of dark chintz, open at the throat, and confined at the waist by a narrow belt of wampum, which, with the bead bracelets on her naked arms, and the embroidered moccasins laced over her feet, was the only Indian ornament about her. Even her hair, which all of her tribe wore laden with ornaments, and hanging down the back, was braided and wreathed in raven bands over her smooth forehead…she rocked back and forth on her seat of skins, chanting, in a sweet,

> mellow voice, the burden of an Indian lullaby. As the form of the hunter darkened the entrance, the Indian girl started up with a look of affectionate joy, and laying her child on the pile of skins, advanced to meet him. (par. 51)

Malaeska, the antithesis of the barbaric, villainous, native woman, is similar to the white fantasy of the Native woman. Stephens emphasizes Malaeska's lack of face paint and hair ornaments because it makes her resemble a white woman and thus, makes her less frightening and more agreeable to white women readers. Upon meeting the white hunter, Malaeska is not fearful, but joyful; leaving the child she is holding to greet him. In *Boneshaker*, the Native American princess Angeline is not depicted as barbaric or villainous, nor is she depicted as a domestic goddess or as having similarities to white women. She is depicted as the opposite of erotic, and is thus liberated from the sexualized Native American stereotype.

While the American Western has its troubles with ethnic exclusion and female stereotypes, Jane Tompkins argues that its role was to totally exclude women. "West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns," argues that the Western formed in response to the nineteenth-century domestic novel. Tompkins argues that "if the Western deliberately rejects…and pointedly repudiates the cult of domesticity, it is because it seeks to marginalize and suppress the figure who stood for those ideals" (39). She argues that the Western was not about discovery or expansion; it was about men regaining their power over women:

> The West was a place where technology was primitive, physical conditions harsh, the social infrastructure nonexistent, and the power and presence of women proportionately reduced. The Western doesn't have anything to do with the West

> as such. It isn't about the encounter between civilization and the frontier. It is about men's fear of losing their mastery, and hence their identity, both of which the Western timelessly reinvents. (Tompkins 44-5)

In Western fiction women are stereotyped and marginalized, existing as static characters to fill plots. *Boneshaker* foregrounds these forgotten women by making them the focus of the novel. *Boneshaker* reinvents the Western by liberating Briar from the stereotypical motherhood role and Princess Angeline from the typical romanticized version of the Native American woman. The nineteenth-century becomes for and about women's social and political equality.

XIV. Conclusion

The depiction of the West found in nineteenth-century America was a romanticized space given to adventure, violence, and bravado, but as *Boneshaker* reinvents the Western frontier, it gives a realistic depiction of the social and geographic isolation in the West. The Seattle in *Boneshaker* is socially, geographically, and politically isolated, but it provides a space in which late century patriarchal ideals of motherhood, marriage, gender, and ethnicity are challenged without fear of societal rejection. *Boneshaker's* women defy nineteenth-century stereotypes that portray them as "more secluded and more home-abiding…absorbed by maternal duties" ("Crimes" par. 1). In nineteenth-century portrayals, women have "neither a strong arm nor strong nerves; her courage and force are always comparative, and, physically, she is never able to compete with man" ("Crimes" par.1). In *Boneshaker*, women are as tough as men and able to survive the walled city as easily as the men. They are free from the domestic spaces that limit them and the repressive cultural and social environment of the nineteenth-century. The

wasteland of Seattle is physically dangerous, but it is in contrast to the world outside if its walls because it is safe for the women that live there.

The walled city, in no way physically reminiscent of a utopia, is a social and cultural feminist utopia in its reshaping of history, gender, and class. Priest writes, "you've [Lucy] done something incredible here. This is as good as anything I've seen in the Outskirts. When I [Briar] found out people lived here, I didn't understand why. But know I do. You've turned a place of peril into a place where people can live in peace" (195). Despite Seattle being a wasteland it is a utopian vision of female empowerment and liberation because the women in *Boneshaker* find it is as a place where they and other women can live in peace.

As alternate history fiction, *Boneshaker* attempts to reimagine history, and in its adaptation, history is given over to the authority of women. However, it fails to reinvision ethnic exclusion by liberating its Chinese characters. The way *Boneshaker* achieves change is by allowing its women to control history. When *Boneshaker* opens, historical control is given to Hale Quarter, a white male historian, in which he writes about the boneshaker incident and Briar. In Hale's version of events, he writes that:

> He [Dr. Blue] was an avaricious man in his way, but no more so than most; and it's possible that he wished only to take the money and run – with a bit of extra cash in his pocket to fund a larger escape. The inventor had recently married (as tongues did wag, his bride was twenty-five years his junior), and there was much speculation that perhaps she had a hand in his decisions. Perhaps she urged his haste or she wished herself married to a richer husband. Or perhaps, as she long maintained, she knew nothing of anything" (17).

Despite Hale's status as historian, the women in the novel take back historical authority because they are the only characters who are aware of the truth. Briar and Angeline are the only characters who are aware that Minnericht is not who he claims he is, and Briar is the only person capable of revealing what really caused the boneshaker incident. Hale's history is embellished and full of speculation in which he seeks to sensationalize the incident.

In metaphorically rewriting history, *Boneshaker* seeks to find out what if women were allowed gender equality in the nineteenth-century. It asks, "How would gender relations have progressed into the twenty-first century America if they were reformed in the nineteenth-century?" If the nineteenth-century was capable of liberating women, then gender relations would have been much more advanced today. While *Boneshaker* "repeats the past and its problems" (Bowser & Croxall 30) by reinforcing ethnic exclusion, it also manages to "subvert the past in a useful and legible manner" (Bowser & Croxall 30) because it emphasizes gender and class equality. As such, *Boneshaker* acts as a fantasy revision of American history in which women are liberated from a male dominated society that demands the domestic and maternal perfection of its women.

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